

1870.¹⁰⁷ Military occupation of the city by Union troops and the presence of Republican militia units waned. Facilitating the Conservatives return to power was a split in the New Hanover Republican Party in which white northerners who pushed for the election of a black man whom they could control faced off against native Republicans and black businessmen who pushed for a white candidate. Historians have explained the Republican Party's weakness in the county as being characterized by a shift away from its power base in the local black population once the party had gained control in 1868, and as a failure to seek an end to factional disputes within its ranks.¹⁰⁸

The end result of Reconstruction was that after years of political strife and social upheaval following the Civil War and freedom for thousands of slaves, North Carolina's ruling political elite had "redeemed" the state—returned it to their control. Despite initial disfranchisement of former Confederates, whites were able to regain power through Klan violence, and political machinations using newspapers and propaganda, all designed to diminish the abilities of blacks to participate in local and state government. Wilmington emerged from a relatively calm Reconstruction era to find itself under fragile and often contested

Conservative Democratic control. Wilmington's Reconstruction experiences were relatively calm because the city experienced less crime and better order when Republicans with a large supportive black voter majority were in control of the city's affairs than when their Conservative counterparts reigned.¹⁰⁹ The Republican Party of Wilmington and New Hanover was also supported by a strong military force to counter white militia and Ku Klux Klan groups.¹¹⁰ The Democratic Party emerged from Reconstruction wholly solidified behind the concept of native white rule within government against the picture it painted of the Republicans as a party represented by northern carpetbaggers and illiterate former slaves.

Post Reconstruction Wilmington

By the 1880s most of Wilmington's residents were eager to put the travails of Reconstruction behind them and move into the last quarter of the nineteenth century as citizens of the state's shining example of industrialization and capitalism based on their empires of naval stores, cotton, and mercantilism. A handful of white businessmen, comfortably in control of the city's affairs as a result of gerrymandered voting districts and Democratic control over local and state government, developed immense fortunes, providing income for

¹⁰⁷ In 1875, Congress passed the short-lived Civil Rights Bill in an attempt to protect the equal rights of blacks. Wilmington whites reacted to the bill, and, to prevent admittance of blacks on equal standing, a few businesses closed their doors in protest when some blacks attempted to enforce the law by demanding equal service. Many of the city's African American leaders, however, resented both the actions of the white businesses as well as those of their race who sought to "create unnecessary strife." Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 236-7; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984), 112.

¹⁰⁸ By the end of 1868, Union troops numbered around 53 in the city. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 141, 153-161.

¹⁰⁹ Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 255.

¹¹⁰ In addition to the Union military presence, Governor Holden had reinforced Republican control through the Militia Act of 1868, creating the 22nd North Carolina militia in Wilmington. The 22nd was comprised of five companies, including many blacks. Col. George Mabson, a mulatto Union veteran, commanded the units alongside Colonel William P. Cannaday, a North Carolina Confederate veteran and a founder of the state's Republican Party. The black militia unit slowly faded from existence after Conservatives regained control and was all but gone by the 1890's. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 137-141.